DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 217 TE 002 798

AUTHOR Dorrell, Donald
TITLE The Nineteenth Century Novel in the 1970 Secondary School (From Pip to Portnoy).
PUB DATE Dec 70
NOTE 6p.
JOURNAL CIT Bulletin of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English; v56 n2 p70-75 December 1970

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Administrator Attitudes; Age; Dropout Prevention; Educational Change; *Elective Subjects; Employment Opportunities; *English Curriculum; Factor Analysis; Literature Appreciation; *Nineteenth Century Literature; Novels; Relevance (Education); *Secondary Education; Student Attitudes; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the place of the nineteenth-century novel in our secondary schools. Although this paper deals essentially with British novels, much of what is said pertains to American novels also. The point is made that the place of these novels in the secondary schools has changed as previously most student in high school accepted the curriculum presented without question, whereas the reverse is true today. Three factors are given as responsible for this change in the student body: (1) Jobs formerly open to a student without a high school education are seldom available now; (2) Minimum age for terminating school is higher; and (3) More people are convinced that staying in school is the correct thing to do. Two other complicating factors in the teaching of the secondary school English class is a reluctance on the part of the schools to change both curricula and teaching methods. It is suggested that there are three types of situations in which the nineteenth century novel could be successfully taught at the secondary level: (1) an elective course entitled, "British Literature," (2) an elective course for study of the novel, and (3) an elective course entitled "The Nineteenth Century Novel." (CK)

Bulletin of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English,
Vol. 56, No. 2,
December 1970.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY NOVEL in the 1970 Secondary School (From Pip to Portnoy)

DONALD DORRELL
Language Arts Supervisor
Topeka Public Schools

There is a place for the nineteenth-century novel in our secondary schools, but it is a rather special place, very different from the past. This paper deals essentially with the nineteenth-century British novels, but much of what I shall say also pertains to the nineteenth-century American novels.

I would now like to explore my reasons for stating that there has been a change in the position of the nineteenth-century novel in our curricula.

Remember how secondary schools were when you and I attended? Students were there because they wanted to be or because their parents wanted them to be, and kids did what their parents wanted them to do then. Students accepted the curriculum as outlined by the administration. They were relatively unquestioning. Those who did question had two choices — drop out or be kicked out. In some instances, those who dropped out or were kicked out found a job, worked hard, and now are on school boards. Teachers were considered infallible. I know now that I probably had some instructors who did not know everything, but at the time I was attending secondary schools I was under the impression that they did.

The curriculum in the English department was somewhat limited. It could afford to be because teachers were dealing with a rather limited student body. What was taught in the English classroom was something special, something different, and in many ways not related to the outside world. It was a unique situation. Education was praised but, in actuality, not deemed to be too practical. It was felt to be separate from the world of work.

Colleges, in a sense, reflected the secondary schools. Students attended, joined various clubs, went to homecoming, elected homecoming queens, attended lectures, accepted what they heard as gospel, successfully passed tests, and eventually were graduated. About the only disruption that occurred on campus was the painting of the local campus landmark by a rival school.

Those of you who are teaching at the college level have perhaps noticed that the student body has changed somewhat in the last ten years. Somewhat (!) — it has changed a great deal. In fact, everyone is discussing the campus problems. Almost everyone has a solution. At least, this is true of the politicians. Ladies and gentlemen, compared to the secondary schools, the student bodies found on university and college campuses are wonderfully homogeneous. At least, college students want to be in the vicinity of an educational institution. This is not true of all secondary school students. I remember a student teacher coming out of a classroom, wide-eyed, bewildered, puzzled, stating, "Why, there are students in there who do not want to learn. There are students in

there who do not even want to be here." With that discovery, she was on her way to becoming a successful secondary school teacher.

What are the reasons for the change in our secondary school populations? First of all, many of the students have no place to go. Jobs that were formerly open to a student without a high school education or jobs which were open to kids 15 to 16 years of age are seldom available now. Another factor that has influenced our school populations is the higher minimum terminating age. Here in Kansas, a student must remain in school until he is 16 years of age, whether he wants to be there or not. About the only exception is the student who is in a correctional institution. If he is merely on probation or parole, he is in class.

Those of you who teach at the college level. Have you ever considered what would happen if some of these helpful legislators would raise the minimum terminating age to 20 or 21? I know some of you feel that you perhaps would not have these students in class, but I can assure you that you would. We have a very sneaky gambit that we use at the secondary school level. It is called the D-pass.

The third factor that has influenced our secondary school population is the very fine selling job we educators have done. We have convinced a number of people that to stay in school is the correct thing to do. Everywhere we besiege people with signs like, "Don't be a dropout," "Quitters don't win," and the more poetic, "Play it cool, stay in school."

Because of the drastic changes in school populations, we have had to make some changes in curriculum and there are many more that we should make. As an example, reading lists for high schools during the last 100 years have remained almost constant. It is only in the last ten years that we have begun to add some more titles. It is interesting to note that some of the old standbys first appeared on reading lists when they qualified as contemporary literature. It seems that our ancestors were not as reluctant to add contemporary novels to the reading lists as we have been up until recent times.

In addition to a seeming reluctance on our part to change our curricula, we have also been somewhat slow to change our methods. In fact some of the methods that were used formerly to teach a novel are still with us. I am not certain that they were ever particularly effective, but they seem less so today. If I might digress for a moment, I would like to discuss three methods that I see still in current usage. With your permission, I would like to personify these methods: Priscilla Panic, Write-It Richard and Nellie Nit.

Priscilla Panic's approach to the novel is usually prefaced by such remarks as "My God, how will I ever get these papers graded," or "What will I do on Thursday?" At the suggestion of a colleague or perhaps a sudden inspiration, she decides to "teach" a novel. For her, this consists of handing out the books and making certain that each student's name appears beside the appropriate number on the master list. When her list is correct, she then commands, "Read." While they read, she catches up on her theme grading, her Christmas cards, or what have you. There is probably only one positive thing to say about such an approach and this is that she has at least allowed the students and the author to meet without outside interference. In fact, her method is not so questionable as is her motive.

Approach number two. Write-It Richard. Write-It Richard doesn't believe in talking about a novel, cluttering the air of his classroom with a lot of worthless discussion. He believes in writing about a novel. His procedure — check out the books, then hand the students a series of study guides, some of which may have been commercially prepared, and then let the student begin to "enjoy" the novel. There are questions for every page of the book. Woe unto the student in Richard's class who happens to read something that appeals to him and he wants to stop to think about it. If Richard should look up and see the child thinking, he will admonish him quickly with, "Don't think, write." Richard is so enamored of his approach that when he hears the popular "Right on," he mistakes it for agreement.

And now for a somewhat sentimental favorite, Nellie Nit. Nellie Nit, as you might surmise, gets her name from the way she attacks a novel; and I use that verb advisedly. This is the procedure that she follows. First, she checks out the books — each one has his own book. "Make certain that your name corresponds to your number on the check-out list. Oh yes, number 13 is missing page 22 and number 19 has the corner torn off of page 268. That happened when we had a particularly disruptive student back in 1956." With these rather necessary preliminaries out of the way, she then proceeds to analyze each page of the novel, sentence by sentence, word by word, comma by comma. Because she suffers from "chunk-itis," her students are assigned to read so many pages per day. Woe unto the child who reads ahead. After all, how are they going to understand and appreciate the novel if they do not analyze it under a qualified instructor?

Nellie's lesson plans consist of notes which she took in a college course called, "The Nineteenth-Century Novel." Her text and notes are almost the exact duplicates of those used by her college professor. Nellie's time in college was not wasted. As a result of sitting through a course called "The Nineteenth-Century Novel," she is now equipped with at least eight weeks of lesson plans. On that bright day when Nellie walks into the teachers' lounge and says, "I have just finished Dickens," she is correct. Dickens, as far as those students are concerned, is finished. It will be a cold day in another English class before those students will read anything written by Dickens.

I mentioned earlier that we had several vestiges of the past remaining in the areas of curriculum and methodology. We also have the way the school's total program is structured. In most schools, each child must take seventh grade, eighth grade, ninth grade, tenth grade and eleventh grade English. In some schools, there is also a required twelfth grade English. Occasionally, there is some stratification in which certain students are designated as basic students. After those poor unfortunates are labeled and set aside, the remaining students are placed in regular English classes. Those of you who are currently teaching know that this process of grouping is not always the most effective; but even if it were, we would still have some rather significant differences within the regular classes.

Reading specialists tell us that at a given grade level there will be a spread in reading ability which amounts to the grade level plus one. In other words, at the tenth grade you would have a spread of 11 reading levels. Assuming that

the lower one, two, or three levels were siphoned off, you would still have a spread of eight years within a typical class. There are indications that this total spread might be increasing. As an example, last year we tested our sixth grade students at mid-year. We found the mean and median to be 6.6. The resulting curve would have made a statistician's heart gladden. It was almost a perfect bell shape. The problems that were indicated for future English teachers were shown by the total spread. There were scores ranging from a low of 2.1 to a high of 10.3. The total spread was 8.2, not the seven plus years that you might have expected.

Now, keeping in mind the spread of reading abilities that are possible unless you have a highly stratified class structure, let's look at the reading level of various nineteenth-century novels.

In a study conducted by Russell W. Annis under Dr. Oscar Haugh, it was found that three commonly taught nineteenth-century novels had wide ranges in their reading levels. The novels were *Silas Marner, A Tale of Two Cities,* and *Ivanhoe.* Usng the Dale-Chall formula, Annis found that both *Ivanhoe* and *Silas Marner* have a reading level range from the fifth grade to college graduate level. The range for *A Tale of Two Cities* is from fourth grade through the twelfth grade.

Eldon Storer of the Topeka Reading Clinic did a survey of *Great Expectations.* Again he used the Dale-Chall formula. He found the range of reading levels in *Great Expectations* to be from the fifth grade reading level to the tenth grade. This looks good until you realize that this novel is usually taught at the ninth grade. Mr. Storer also pointed out that the length of the sentences were such that they can be a stumbling block. A ninth grade student with average reading ability is in trouble when he is confronted with a sentence that contains sixty words, even if the words are relatively simple.

With the aforementioned facts in mind, I would like to state that I do not believe that the nineteenth-century novel is for every student. However, I do realize that there are certain circumstances in which an instructor feels compelled to teach a novel (a nineteenth-century novel). This situation can arise for various reasons. There may be administrative pressure, "It has come to my attention, Miss Jones, that we do not intend to teach a novel during the coming year." Or peer pressure —"We all always teach a novel." Or maybe you honestly have a good reason for wanting to teach a novel. I think an entire class can be taught a nineteenth-century novel only if two things happen. First, the instructor must realize that all students cannot read an unabridged version and that he or she must provide texts which these students can read. Secondly, he or she must acknowledge to these particular students and to himself or herself that the study of an abridged version of a novel is actually something less. In a sense, the students are studying perhaps what can be best called the essence of an author. Oh yes, one other thing. Because of the great diversity of interests that are held by our students the instructor must also be prepared for some students to be somewhat disinterested in the whole proceedings.

The question of whether or not to cut a novel is another area. In fact, I am sure we could spend a great amount of time discussing this. However, I feel that the use of an abridged version, by some students, is the only way in which

an entire class may study a novel and have each student have some sense of satisfaction.

There will be some who will say, "Let the student struggle and read as much as he can, and I will explain that which he cannot read." In such a circumstance, a student will learn, but he will learn what you explain, which is what you think, not the novel.

At this point, I would like to become a little more positive. Just what type of student in our secondary schools should become involved and can profit from a study of the nineteenth-century novel in the unabridged form? Quite frankly, I feel that a certain type, which I shall call an "English teacher" type, should become involved with the nineteenth-century novel. I see nothing derogatory with this term. As a matter of fact, I think it would be a rather wonderful world if all people were "English teacher" types. That is, I find that English teachers as a whole are very creative people, and if not creative, they are at least sensitive to creativity in others. Of course, if all people were "English teacher" types, we would have a change — there would necessarily be a shift of values. In our secondary schools, we would have large libraries and small gyms. We would have adequate theaters and no second gym. Our job would be much simpler, too. We would have no motivation problems.

Now, in the event that some of you are questioning the existence of an actual "English teacher" type, let me ask a few questions. Haven't you all, at one time or another, upon hearing that a former student was planning to become an English teacher said, "He or she will be a good one." Or, perhaps, in other instances, "Oh no, he'll never make it." Some further evidence — wouldn't we almost rather be caught nude in class than to use a double negative? Don't we ask questions such as, "For whom are you voting?" Command our dogs, "Lie down, Spot." And wouldn't we rather use any other four-letter word than the word "ain't" — particularly other than first person singular?

I have attempted to describe the type of student who I think should come in contact with the nineteenth-century novel. Now, I would like to describe the situations in which I think the nineteenth-century novel can be taught. First of all, in any class, if a thematic assignment is given, there are certain of the nineteenth-century novels which can be included on the reading list. If we do this, the proper student will gravitate toward those novels.

I see a possibility of an elective course entitled, "British Literature"; and if the length of time involved in teaching this course is sufficient, I can see some or, under certain circumstances, all of the students reading a nineteenth-century novel. This would probably be a rather select group of students.

There are two other ways that the nineteenth-century novels can be included in the curriculum. An elective course could be established for the purpose of studying the novel, and the nineteenth century novel would naturally be a part of such a course. It is also conceivable that an elective course entitled "The Nineteenth-Century Novel" could be organized. Both of the latter two courses could be taught in a class situation or through the seminar approach.

I feel that the important key to all the aforementioned approaches is the word "elective." When you consider what secondary school populations are like today, I think it becomes apparent that not all of our students can or

should have the same literary background. To insist that even a majority of the students has a common experience in the area of literature is not fair to students, to teachers, and, above all, to the individual author.

Topeka, Kansas
October, 1970